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O'Malley's Lt. Gov. Pick Sends A Message

Choice Affirms Pr. George's Clout

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Political analysts debate just how much a candidate for lieutenant governor can influence voters' choices for the top of the ticket. But there appears little doubt that Prince George's County will play a pivotal role in next year's Maryland elections.

So yesterday's formal announcement -- nine months before the Democratic primary -- of Prince George's Del. Anthony G. Brown as Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley's running mate sent an important signal, party strategists said.

"What this says to Prince George's County is, 'I'm thinking about you, and this far out I'm going to put one of your brightest on the ticket,'" said Rushern L. Baker III, a former Democratic delegate from Prince George's who was among about 200 people at Newton White Mansion in Mitchellville for the morning announcement.

"Anthony Brown gets things done," an upbeat O'Malley said, standing with his new partner in front of a freshly printed green O'Malley-Brown banner. "He will help us rid Annapolis of that Washington-style gridlock."

It is testament to the county's political potency that not only did O'Malley choose someone from Prince George's, but his Democratic rival for governor, Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, also is considering running mates from the majority-black county.

Duncan starts the race better known in neighboring Prince George's, which most analysts see as crucial to his chances of winning the primary in September. "It doesn't have to be a landslide, but it has to be by a fair margin," said Rep. Albert R. Wynn (D-Md.), a Duncan supporter.

Conventional wisdom in Maryland politics has been that a candidate from the Washington region must turn to Baltimore for a lieutenant governor pick. But Duncan's campaign said he is seriously considering state Sen. Gwendolyn T. Britt (D-Prince George's), a first-term senator and heralded civil rights activist, among others from the county and the Baltimore area.

Montgomery and Prince George's together account for more than 35 percent of the state's registered Democrats, whereas Baltimore and Baltimore County are home to about 30 percent. With Duncan and O'Malley both hoping to sop up votes in their home turf, Prince George's becomes a key battleground in the primary.

Still, some party leaders say an effort by Duncan to win support in Prince George's by picking a running mate from the county could backfire.

"When you ignore the Baltimore metro region, you do that at your own peril," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., who represents parts of Prince George's and Calvert counties.

Brown's selection as O'Malley's lieutenant governor candidate, which was publicly confirmed by O'Malley last week, added racial as well as geographic diversity to the mayor's ticket. Democratic strategists said the early pick of Brown, a second-term lawmaker who serves as House majority whip, also served to bolster O'Malley's strengths.

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"He reinforces the notion that this is a ticket of youth and energy," said Mike Morrill, a longtime Maryland Democratic operative. "It looks like a leadership choice, not a geographic choice, even though it meets those considerations."

There has been intense speculation about the political future of Brown, 44, the son of a Jamaican father and Swiss mother, since his return from Iraq, where he was deployed for nearly 10 months as an Army Reservist. Mentions of Brown's military service drew some of the heartiest applause yesterday as he and O'Malley, 42, made appearances in Frederick, Hagerstown and Baltimore. Brown acknowledged in Prince George's that he would be "a new face" to many in Maryland but said he is "a new face with some old-fashioned values" learned from his immigrant parents.

O'Malley had been widely expected to name an African American running mate from Prince George's, in part to heal wounds from 2002. The party's nominee that year, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, alienated many black activists in the party with her pick of a white running mate who was a former Republican. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R), meanwhile, made history with his choice of Michael S. Steele, an African American.

Even Brown boosters acknowledge his selection is not without risk. Though considered whip smart, Brown has never run statewide and his ability to deliver someone else's message on the stump has not been tested.

Brown's pull across Prince George's also remains to be seen. Several leading Democrats in the county -- including Wynn and former county executive Wayne K. Curry, a Democrat who is rumored to be among those Ehrlich is considering as a running mate -- have much deeper roots.

Brown has been a Maryland resident since 1992, when he moved to Largo a few months after graduating from Harvard Law School. He has won election twice in one of eight state House districts that include portions of Prince George's.

Sen. Ulysses Currie (D-Prince George's), a Brown mentor who introduced the ticket in Mitchellville yesterday, said the county's traditional political machine has fractured in recent years, which may work to Brown's advantage. "Anthony Brown is well respected across the board, and while he may be a newcomer on the block, that could be an advantage for him."

Adrian Howell, a legislative aide to Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson (D), who has remained neutral in the race, said Brown reflects the county's changing demographics. "He's the new, fresh face in Prince George's politics," Howell said. "Young, black professionals in this county can identify with him."

Staff writer Ovetta Wiggins contributed to this report.

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Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, right, with his just-named running mate, Del. Anthony G. Brown.

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